

HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Epicurus and the Fear of Death...

Is it really *irrational* to fear death?

- » If death entails the permanent extinction of an individual, then wouldn't an individual be rationally justified in fearing the prospect of their own demise?
- » According to Epicurus (and his followers), the answer is *NO!*
- » In fact, by Epicurean lights, the appropriate—i.e. rational—attitude to cultivate towards one's own death *ought to be* one of tranquil indifference, rather than anxious concern, since death, when it is properly understood, is truly “nothing to us”.

How (specifically) does Epicurus' argue that it is *irrational* to fear death?

- » We'll briefly consider three arguments put forward by Epicurus (and his followers) in support of the claim that *death does not harm an individual and is therefore something that ought not to be feared by an individual*



HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Epicurus and the Fear of Death...

A few key texts...

"When we say that pleasure is the goal of life we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption... but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul. For it is not drinking bouts and continuous partying and enjoying boys and women , or consuming fish and the other dainties of an extravagant table that produce the pleasant life, but [rather] sober calculation which searches out the reasons for every choice and avoidance and drives out the opinions which are the source of the greatest turmoil for men's souls"

"If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all... we would have no need of natural science..."

"It is impossible for someone ignorant about the nature of the universe but still suspicious about the subjects of the myths to dissolve his feelings of fear about the most important matters"

"One must reckon that of desires [and beliefs] some are natural and some are groundless..."



HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Epicurus and the Fear of Death...

A few more key texts...

"Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense experience, and what has no sense experience is nothing to us"

"Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense experience, and death is the privation of sense experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality..."

"So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist"



HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Epicurus and the Fear of Death...

The ‘No Perception of Harm’ Argument...

- (1) Death is the dissolution of the soul
and since
- (2) What is dissolved does not perceive
it follows (by 1 and 2) that
- (3) Death is the absence of perception
and since
- (4) What is not perceived is nothing to us
it follows (by 3 and 4) that
- (5) Death is nothing to us
finally, since
- (6) What is nothing to us is not a harm to us
it follows that
- (7) Death is not a harm to us



HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Epicurus and the Fear of Death...

The ‘No Subject of Harm’ Argument...

If death is bad, *for whom* is it bad? Not for the living, since they’re not dead, and not for the dead, since they don’t exist. One way to set out Epicurus’ argument is as follows:

- (1) Death is annihilation
- (2) The living have not yet been annihilated
- (3) Death does not affect the living (from 1 and 2)
- (4) So, death is not bad for the living (from 3)
- (5) For something to be bad for somebody, that person has to exist
- (6) The dead do not exist (from 1)
- (7) Therefore, death is not bad for the dead (from 5 and 6)
- (8) Therefore death is bad for neither the living nor the dead (from 4 and 7)



HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Evaluating the Arguments...

Some possible worries/objections...

(1) What exactly is the object of our fear?

- Is it the fear of *being dead*?
- Is it the fear that *one will die* (someday)?
- Is it the fear of *premature death*?
- Is it the fear of the *process of dying*?

(2) Is it really true that *X harms Y only if Y is able to perceive X*?

- Are unperceived harms really not harmful?

(3) Can't death be considered a harm in so far as it *deprives an individual* of goods they would have had access to had they not died?



HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Epicurus and the Fear of Death...

Just a few more key texts...

"Death, then, is nothing to us and does not affect us in the least, now that the nature of the mind is understood to be mortal. And as in time past we felt no distress when the advancing Punic hosts were threatening Rome... so when we are no more, when body and soul, upon whose union our being depends, are divorced, you may be sure that nothing at all will have the power to affect us or awaken sensation in us, who shall not then exist—not even if the earth be confounded with sea, and the sea with sky..."

"Look back at time ... before our birth. In this way nature holds before our eyes the mirror of our future after death. Is this so grim, so gloomy?"



HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Epicurus and the Fear of Death...

The ‘Symmetry’ Argument...

According to the Epicurean poet Lucretius, anyone who fears death should consider the time before he was born. For the past infinity of pre-natal non-existence is just like the future infinity of post-mortem non-existence. And since we do not consider not having existed for an eternity before our births to be a terrible thing, neither should we consider not existing for an eternity after our deaths to be evil. One way to put the argument is as follows:

- (1) My previous pre-natal nonexistence is not, and was not, bad for me.
- (2) My previous pre-natal nonexistence is relevantly similar to my forthcoming post-mortem nonexistence.
- (3) Therefore, my forthcoming post-mortem nonexistence is not, and will not be, bad for me.



PHILOSOPHY 20A

The History of Ancient Greek Philosophy

» Three things that you should (hopefully) take away from the course...

1. A better conception of *what philosophy is all about*
2. An understanding of *how philosophical inquiry is conducted*
3. Realized the *benefit of doing philosophy*